Patent claims

1. A method of sorting items of mail by means of sorting machines with sorting endpoints, which comprise sorting bins (14) or replaceable containers (16), in multiple sorting passes, the surface of the item of mail with the distribution address being recorded and the latter read during each first sorting pass,
characterized in that
- during the first sorting pass, characteristic features of the item of mail and/or features of the address are additionally determined for each item of mail as a set of features for distinguishing at least n items of mail, where n = the maximum multiple delivery rate to be expected,
- when a defined level is reached in each sorting endpoint, the container (16) is changed or the sorting bin (14) is emptied and the items of mail emptied out are stored temporarily in containers (16) while maintaining their order, the containers (16) being identified at least with the sorting endpoint number,
- for each item of mail, the order of reading the distribution address, the associated sorting endpoint number and/or the number of the container (16) in which the item of mail is stored in this sorting pass, the distribution code determined from the address read and the characteristic feature set are stored in a database (10),
- in the second and each further sorting pass, the items of mail from each container (16) from the

respective previous sorting pass are put into this or another sorting machine in the order in which they were stored in the container (16), the associated endpoint or container number is reported to the sorting machine and therefore the database section relevant to the respective container (16) is determined, the data in each database section being ordered in accordance with the order of reading the distribution address, for each item of mail the defined characteristic feature set is determined, with the aid of which the respective distribution code is then determined, by the characteristic feature set of the first item of mail being compared with n characteristic feature sets stored one after another in this database section, beginning with the feature set of the first item of mail, and, if there is agreement within a defined range, the associated stored distribution code being assigned to the first item of mail, by the characteristic feature set of the second item of mail being compared with n characteristic feature sets stored one after another in this database section, beginning with the feature set of the second item of mail, and, if there is agreement, the stored distribution code for this feature set being assigned to the second item of mail, and this procedure is repeated until the feature sets of all the items of mail supplied have been compared with the associated stored feature sets.

2. The method as claimed in claim 1, characterized in that if the order of the containers (16) belonging to a sorting endpoint has not been identified, in

order to detect the transition from one container (16) to the other, in addition the respective last item of mail before or the first item of mail after each sorting endpoint emptying is identified in the database (10), and the feature set of the first item of mail of each container (16) of one sorting endpoint in each case is compared with the first n feature sets of the database sections associated with this sorting endpoint but not yet processed in this sorting pass until agreement, and therefore the database section associated with the items of mail in this container (16), have been determined.

3. The method as claimed in claim 1 or 2, characterized in that the contents of the database sections are stored in memories which are fitted to the relevant containers (16) and which can be written to and read from, said memories being read out before the items of mail are put into the sorting machines for the second and further sorting passes and being put into the control systems of these sorting machines.

4. The method as claimed in claim 1 or 2, characterized in that the relevant database contents are transmitted electronically to the sorting machines carrying out the second and further sorting passes.

5. An apparatus for implementing the method as claimed in claim 1.